

The Man in the Stone House

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"NO, I don't know what's going to happen," Eadbrook repeated seriously.

The girl's manner changed instantly. She looked up at him with an expression of soberness that matched his own.

"Trouble?" she repeated after him. "You make me frightened, Walter. Tell me, quick."

"Do you know why your—why Ezra Mudge got me up here to-day?" he asked, measuring his words carefully.

"Why—I don't know whether I do or not," she replied, looking into his eyes. "Perhaps I do."

"I'm sure you don't," he continued. "That is, you don't know all. He wants me to desert Joel and Henry and Starr—"

"Starr?" she interrupted. "Oh, yes; I know."

"Starr's the man Joel brought from the West," Eadbrook explained. "Well, I'm to desert the rest of the crowd that's trying to do something to make Boxton a real live place, fit to live in, and join Ezra in keeping them from doing anything at all. I don't know what his reasons are, Lou. I can't figure out why he shouldn't be glad to help the movement. It would be money in his pocket. I guess it's just sheer cussedness; and that's what everybody else thinks. But you see what he wanted of me, anyway. I told him I wouldn't consider it—not for anything."

"What did he say to that?" she asked breathlessly.

"He didn't say much, but he hinted something that made my blood run cold," was the reply. "He hinted that he'd stand in our way—that he would—I can't tell you, Louise! It's too outrageous. He has no right to consider you as something to offer and refuse like that. I told him so. Wasn't I right? Would you have had me say anything else? Would you have me go back on my friends? Tell me, dear."

IT was clear that Eadbrook, in his soaring idealism of the moment, was expecting from the girl nothing less than a complete vindication of the position he had taken. He looked for a reward for his uprightness; he wanted to hear that he was wholly and praiseworthy right. That was why the girl's reply shocked him. She looked at him with clear, appraising eyes and said:

"But is it worth making such a fuss over, Walter? After all, may not dad be right and your friends wrong? Have you tried to understand dad's point of view?"

Eadbrook gazed at her, stupefied. "You don't understand," he told her.

"Why, of course I may not understand it all," she admitted. "But it seems to me that dad thinks one thing and your friends think another, and they can't agree. Dad wants you to consider his side a little. He's angry, no doubt, just as you would be if some stranger came to town when you were as old as dad is, and wanted to impose his ideas on you. You think he's a terribly mean old man, and so do most other people; but I never knew him to do a single dishonest thing, Walter, never. He's very stern, and very set in his ways, but—"

"Oh, you simply couldn't understand," interrupted Eadbrook. "I don't expect you to, little girl. Women don't see the things we do."

"I wonder if you understand some of the things women do?" replied the girl gently. "I know that dad and Aunt Lyddy have always been very good to me. They brought me up, and educated me, and have always done everything for me, and they have a right to expect that I'll consider their feelings a little. You don't know how sweet Aunt Lyddy was when I told her about you and me. She threw her arms around me and kissed me, and we had a good long cry together. Of



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course dad didn't do anything like that, but he was nice about it, too. He said, 'Louise, your life is your own. I wouldn't think of interfering with you, not even if you were going to make a fool of yourself.' I knew what he meant. It was a lot for him to say. Can't we just forget these other people, dear, and let them go their own way, and we'll go ours? Oh, dear, I do so want to be happy!"

"I tell you, you don't understand," reiterated Eadbrook stubbornly. "And if Ezra Mudge is so thoughtful of you, why

is it he's never told you anything about—" "Myself? I think there must be a good reason. Sometimes, Walter, when I wonder about it, I'd a little bit rather he wouldn't. There must be some good reason why he thinks it isn't best."

"You know what some people say?" the young man hinted darkly.

"People say anything when they are trying to guess at things. I don't complain. Why should anybody else? You say I don't understand, dear, but what is there to understand? What is it dad

wants you to do? Just not to quarrel with him; that's all, isn't it?"

She seized his hands and put them against a hot cheek and held them there.

"I wonder if you've considered my position as much as your own?" she asked, with a nervous smile.

"He's twisted you around his little finger, Lou—the way he wants to twist me," replied Eadbrook. "I tell you, he's a cruel, unprincipled man, Lou. You can't see it, but I can. Aunt Lyddy's a dear old soul, but he's trampled her down till she doesn't dare to call her soul her own. He's a brute, and I'm not afraid to tell him so. I won't knuckle to him. I couldn't look myself in the face if I did, Lou. I tell you, you don't understand. You can't understand. It's a matter of honor with me, and he knows it. And the meanest thing of all is the way he's playing you against me."

"I don't think it's very nice of you to keep telling me I don't understand," she remonstrated, still very gently. "I feel sure now that I do. I think you're just a little bit unreasonable because you haven't had time to think it over. But if we were to go on this way we might end by quarreling—and we mustn't quarrel, must we? Perhaps if you came back and saw dad to-morrow—"

"And crawl on my knees in front of him and promise not to dare to think for myself any more? I'm astounded, Lou, that you should suggest such a thing. I have a right to expect something else from you. You ought to stand with me. You ought to take my part. And you take his, instead. Lou, I demand—"

THE girl rose quickly.

"Please go now," she said. "Really, Walter, we mustn't do this. I love you—indeed I do. I do love you, dear. That ought to satisfy you until we see each other again."

Eadbrook took up his hat. But he stood irresolutely for a moment, and so fell victim to the temptation to force the issue.

"I'm going," he said. "But I'm not going to play the coward, Lou. Joel and Henry and Starr have started things by now. By to-night everybody'll know that there's going to be a new kind of Boxton. If you love me you'll stand with me. Good-by."

He left the room without another word. The tears stood in her eyes as she watched him go. She felt a powerful impulse to call him back, but she disobeyed it. A little tinge of bitterness, unlike anything she had ever felt in her life, came into her heart. "He wouldn't want to give up a bit to me," she thought. Then she wondered if she had been unreasonable. She heard his voice at the door outside, and she ran quickly to the dining-room door and listened. Aunt Lyddy was saying:

"Please don't do anything to cross him, Walter. He's a good man at heart. People are terribly wrong about him. They don't understand him. Only you mustn't cross him."

The girl's heart beat fast as she heard the reply:

"Why do you let him tread on you, Aunt Lyddy? He simply rides roughshod over you and Louise."

"Nobody treads on me, Walter," was the reply, with a patient little remonstrance in it. "You mustn't say such things; I'm surprised at you."

Then the door shut and a quick tread on the path outside told of Eadbrook's departure.

WHEN Ezra Mudge awoke at his usual hour, he found Louise in the sitting-room. The bloom was quite wiped off her cheeks and there were indisputable evidences that she had been weeping.

READ THIS: THEN START THE STORY

JOEL TIBB, a grocer of Boxton, Vermont, traveling in California with his wife, stops off at Empire City, and meets the town booster, J. Bradlee Starr. The spirit of the town gets hold of Tibb, and he approaches Starr with a plan for boosting Boxton. Returning home, Tibb finds Boxton cold to his plan; but Starr is keen to try his hand on a New England town, and offers to come without a salary. There are a few business men in Boxton who sympathize with the grocer's plans, among them young Walter Eadbrook, proprietor of a shoe store. He is in love with Louise Searles, a young girl about whom some mystery attaches. She is the adopted daughter of Ezra Mudge, the richest man in Boxton, who lives in a big stone house on a hill, and has the reputation of being close-fisted and hard at a bargain. Eadbrook has Louise's promise to marry him, but has not yet consulted Ezra Mudge. Starr arrives in Boxton, full of enthusiasm, and is shown around the town by Tibb, Eadbrook, and Treadway, editor of the *Banner*. Starr proposes that they ask the richest man to head the list of supporters with a check. They call on Mudge that evening to explain Starr's plan for boosting Boxton. Mudge refuses his support. The committee leaves, Starr declaring he will not be blocked by Mudge. Next morning Mudge sends for Eadbrook, and, after explaining that Louise has told of their engagement, offers Eadbrook a partnership if he will resign from the boosting committee. He intimates that he will influence Louise against Eadbrook if he refuses. The young man is greatly distressed, and seeks an interview with Louise.